

OBAMA TRIED TO STALL GIS' IRAQ WITHDRAWAL

By Amir Taheri (*The New York Post*)

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While campaigning in public for a speedy withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, Sen. Barack Obama has tried in private to persuade Iraqi leaders to delay an agreement on a draw-down of the American military presence.

According to Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, Obama made his demand for delay a key theme of his discussions with Iraqi leaders in Baghdad in July.

"He asked why we were not prepared to delay an agreement until after the US elections and the formation of a new administration in Washington," Zebari said in an interview.

Obama insisted that Congress should be involved in negotiations on the status of US troops - and that it was in the interests of both sides not to have an agreement negotiated by the Bush administration in its "state of weakness and political confusion."

"However, as an Iraqi, I prefer to have a security agreement that regulates the activities of foreign troops, rather than keeping the matter open." Zebari says.

Though Obama claims the US presence is "illegal," he suddenly remembered that American troops were in Iraq within the legal framework of a UN mandate. His advice was that, rather than reach an accord with the "weakened Bush administration," Iraq should seek an extension of the UN mandate.

While in Iraq, Obama also tried to persuade the US commanders, including Gen. David Petraeus, to suggest a "realistic withdrawal date." They declined.

Obama has made many contradictory statements with regard to Iraq. His latest position is that US combat troops should be out by 2010. Yet his effort to delay an agreement would make that withdrawal deadline impossible to meet.

Supposing he wins, Obama's administration wouldn't be fully operational before February - and naming a new ambassador to Baghdad and forming a new negotiation team might take longer still.

By then, Iraq will be in the throes of its own campaign season. Judging by the past two elections, forming a new coalition government may then take three months. So the Iraqi negotiating team might not be in place until next June.

Then, judging by how long the current talks have taken, restarting the process from scratch would leave the two sides needing at least six months to come up with a draft accord. That puts us at May 2010 for when the draft might be submitted to the Iraqi parliament - which might well need another six months to pass it into law.

Thus, the 2010 deadline fixed by Obama is a meaningless concept, thrown in as a sop to his anti-war base.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the Bush administration have a more flexible timetable in mind.

According to Zebari, the envisaged time span is two or three years - departure in 2011 or 2012. That would let Iraq hold its next general election, the third since liberation, and resolve a number of domestic political issues.

Even then, the dates mentioned are only "notional," making the timing and the cadence of withdrawal conditional on realities on the ground as appreciated by both sides.

Iraqi leaders are divided over the US election. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (whose party is a member of the Socialist International) sees Obama as "a man of the Left" - who, once elected, might change his opposition to Iraq's liberation. Indeed, say Talabani's advisers, a President Obama might be tempted to appropriate the victory that America has already won in Iraq by claiming that

his

intervention transformed failure into success.

Maliki's advisers have persuaded him that Obama will win - but the prime minister worries about the senator's "political debt to the anti-war lobby" - which is determined to transform Iraq into a disaster to prove that toppling Saddam Hussein was "the biggest strategic blunder in US history."

Other prominent Iraqi leaders, such as Vice President Adel Abdul-Mahdi and Kurdish regional President Massoud Barzani, believe that Sen. John McCain would show "a more realistic approach to Iraqi issues."

Obama has given Iraqis the impression that he doesn't want Iraq to appear anything like a success, let alone a victory, for America. The reason? He fears that the perception of US victory there might revive the Bush Doctrine of "pre-emptive" war - that is, removing a threat before it strikes at America.

Despite some usual equivocations on the subject, Obama rejects pre-emption as a legitimate form of self-defense. To be credible, his foreign-policy philosophy requires Iraq to be seen as a failure, a disaster, a quagmire, a pig with lipstick or any of the other apocalyptic adjectives used by the American defeat industry in the past five years.

Yet Iraq is doing much better than its friends hoped and its enemies feared. The UN mandate will be extended in December, and we may yet get an agreement on the status of forces before President Bush leaves the White House in January.